

Good afternoon, Co-Chairs, Vice Chairs, Ranking Members, and Members of the Select Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Thank you for holding this hearing on the important subject of veterans' access to pre-trial diversionary programs. Connecticut is a leader in tackling root causes of offending behavior, so it is a pleasure and an honor to work with forward-thinking organizations and lawmakers such as you.

My name is Christopher McCluskey and I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify in favor of SB 114. I serve as the Director of Forensic Services and Veterans Affairs at the Community Renewal Team, Inc., the largest non-profit provider of human services in Connecticut. The agency's mission is *preparing our community to meet life's challenges*, and my team works directly with United States Veterans to alleviate many of the challenges they face. SB 114 is one critical step in reducing the number of veterans who are jailed for low-level offenses due to their unique mental health needs. SB 114 acknowledges the special needs of veterans and allows for tailored treatment without the shame or stigma of jail time.

We provide veterans, including those veterans with a history of incarceration, and the civilian offender population with residential and non-residential re-entry services when they are transitioning to permanent housing. Among the 209 veterans that my team sees each year, SB 114 could make a tremendous difference. About 50% of our veterans would be eligible for diversionary programs, eliminating the need for jail time, and saving the state of Connecticut a little over \$2,000,000.

Because my department at CRT oversees both criminal sanctions and veterans' programs, and because we are housed within the same division that provides substance abuse and mental health treatment, we have a unique vantage point for observing the synergistic effect between

veterans' services and pre-trial diversion. CRT operates the CSSD-funded Enfield Alternative in the Community (AIC) Center, one of many in the State. The AIC program provides intake and assessment, intensive case management, toxicology screening, evidence-based group interventions, community service, and job development. Each AIC program in the State employs a court liaison who accepts pre-trial referrals from the Connecticut Judicial Branch and subsequently reports compliance regarding the conditions of program participation. While the model has evolved over the years, there is a documented record of success addressing Connecticut's overcrowded jails dating back to the 1980s.

CRT is also contracted by the federal Veterans Administration (VA) to operate a 12-unit transitional living program for veterans who are involved with the criminal justice system. This program has been in operation since May 2010 and has realized a 91% successful discharge rate, placing 72% of program participants into permanent residence. Veterans' Crossing provides intensive case management, coordination and linkages to VA services (medical, mental health and substance abuse services), employment supports, and financial literacy classes. Additionally, CRT is the sole contractor for the state of Connecticut VA-funded Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF). SSVF is a program designed to enhance housing stability and prevent homelessness among veteran families who currently reside in or are transitioning into permanent housing. With this objective in mind, CRT provides comprehensive support services including outreach, case management services, and assistance to veteran families in obtaining VA and other public benefits.

In my years working with veterans across this spectrum of programs, I have become familiar with the unique challenges veterans face and the relative efficacy of different solutions

to these challenges. I was delighted to read SB 114 because it confronts these challenges head-on. This bill is not just about keeping people out of prison and saving taxpayer dollars; it's also about making a monumental impact on the human condition of these vulnerable individuals. As you know, one in four of our warriors return from Iraq and Afghanistan affected by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD makes adjusting to civilian life and work hard enough, but when it contributes to convictions for low-level offenses (e.g. small drug possession charges), limiting housing, employment, and education opportunities; PTSD makes its victims pay twice. Untreated mental illness, such as PTSD, is pervasive in our service-members and veterans. If a veteran lacks peer role models who acknowledge and address their mental health issues, it is unlikely that the veteran will disclose his issues to himself or others. In my experience, 90 - 95% of the Connecticut veteran population we serve suffers from undiagnosed mental illness, diagnosed mental illness, substance abuse, or co-morbidity of two or all three of these. SB 114 increases the likelihood that we can heal the root cause of these problems.

I applaud the committee for formulating SB 114 and providing veterans with an option. As the saying goes, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." Our communities' job is to make the veteran thirsty. When a veteran identifies the issues he or she is facing—even if they don't include psychiatric labels—and raises his or her hand to enroll in a particular program, the sense of agency over that choice increases the likelihood of follow-through and completing a program.

In sum, there is no single silver bullet for helping veterans reintegrate into civilian society as healthy and productive contributors. SB 114, however, represents a manageable and meaningful step we can take right now to address the signature wound of the present war.

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Indeed, we look forward to continuing to work with your Committee and our partners at the Department of Correction, CSSD, VA, and DMHAS over the coming years on the lifecycle of veterans' issues. On behalf of the veterans we serve, we are grateful for the development of SB 114 and are hopeful that SB 114 will pass unanimously.

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have. Please feel free to reach me at McCluskeyC@crtct.org or Community Renewal Team, Inc., 555 Windsor Street, Hartford, CT 06120.